

Message Text

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07
L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /059 W
-----261830Z 057077 /42
R 261525Z MAY 77
FM AMEMBASSY PARIS
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3196

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 PARIS 15500

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, FR
SUBJECT: REPUBLICAN PARTY SUCCEEDS INDEPENDENT
REPUBLICANS

REF: PARIS 9350
SUMMARY: THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICAN PARTY, MAKING
A LAST DITCH ATTEMPT TO PULL ITSELF OUT OF THE
DOLDRUMS BEFORE THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS,
HELD A NATIONAL CONGRESS ON MAY 19-21. STATE
SECRETARY SOISSON WAS ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL,
SUPPLANTING JACQUES DOMINATI. SOISSON WILL MAKE
EVERY EFFORT TO DYNAMIZE THE PARTI REPUBLICAIN,
AS THE RI IS NOW CALLED, BUT IT WILL BE AN UPHILL
STRUGGLE. ALONG THE WAY HE WILL HAVE TO CONTENT
WITH NOT ONLY RPR PRESIDENT CHIRAC, BUT THE PR
DIEHARD NOTABLES OPPOSED TO SOISSON'S "LIBERALISM"
AND TO HIS EFFORTS TO GET RID OF DEAD WOOD.
END SUMMARY

1. BACKGROUND: SINCE THE ELECTION OF
GISCARD D'ESTAING TO THE PRESIDENCY IN MAY 1974,
THE FORTUNES OF THE INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS
(RI) HAVE UNDERGONE THREE DISTINCT PHASES. THE
FIRST LASTED FROM THE VICTORY OF THEIR FOUNDER FOR
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THE HIGHEST OFFICE IN THE LAND UP UNTIL THE SERIOUS
SETBACKS FOR THEIR PARTY IN THE MARCH 1976 CANTONAL
ELECTIONS. DURING THIS TIME THEIR FUTURE LOOKED
ROSY AND THAT OF THEIR ARCH-RIVAL IN THE MAJORITY,
THE GAULLISTS (UDR NOW RPR) DIM INDEED. IN THE
SECOND PERIOD (MARCH 1976 UNTIL MARCH 1977) THEIR
FORTUNES MOVED STEADILY DOWNWARDS, DESPITE EFFORTS

ON THE PART OF MINISTER OF THE INTERIOR (AND PARTY LEADER) PONIATOWSKI TO UNDERMINE ANY KIND OF GAULLIST REVIVAL. WHEN FORMER PRIME MINISTER JACQUES CHIRAC FOUNDED THE RPR IN DECEMBER OF 1976 AND SHORTLY THEREAFTER ANNOUNCED HIS CANDIDACY FOR THE POST OF MAYOR OF PARIS -- IN THE FACE OF THE PRESIDENT'S HAND-PICKED CANDIDATE -- THE IR APPEARED MORE THAN EVER MERELY ONE OF THREE JUNIOR PARTNERS IN THE GOVERNMENT COALITION. THE FINAL PERIOD HAS LASTED BARELY THREE MONTHS; FROM THE DISASTROUS RI DEFEATS IN THIS YEAR'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS UNTIL THE FOUNDING OF THE NEW PARTY ON MAY 19. THE QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER OR NOT THE NEW SECRETARY GENERAL CAN PULL THE PARTY OUT OF THE DOLDRUMS IN TIME FOR THE NEXT LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS.

2. THE NEW SECRETARY GENERAL: AS EXPECTED, JEAN-PIERRE SOISSON WAS ELECTED SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PARTY AT A NATIONAL CONGRESS HELD IN FREJUS (MAY 19-21. YOUNG (43), AN ENARQUE, A FORMER LEADER GRANTEE, SOISSON REPRESENTS THE PARTY'S LAST HOPES IN SAVING ITSELF FROM A THUMPING DEFEAT IN 1978. HE WILL, AS HE PROMISED BEFOREHAND, STEP DOWN FROM HIS POST AS STATE SECRETARY FOR YOUTH AND SPORTS IN ORDER TO DEVOTE ALL HIS ENERGY TO ANIMATING THE PARTY. IN FACT, HE HESITATED SOME WEEKS BEFORE ACCEPTING THE CANDIDACY, MAINLY TO ASSURE HIMSELF THAT HE WOULD HAVE FREE REIN TO

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REMOLD THE PARTY AS HE WISHED. IN THIS HE GIVES PROOF OF A CERTAIN STRENGTH OF CHARACTER, SINCE HE HAD TO BUCK WELL-ENTRENCHED OLDIES LIKE PONIATOWSKI, D'ORNANO, CHINAUD, AND OTHERS.

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L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

USIA-06 TRSE-00 OMB-01 /059 W

-----261831Z 057078 /42

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3. THE FREJUS CONGRESS: THE CONGRESS ITSELF, WHILE HARDLY A FLOP, FELL SHORT OF SOISSON'S EXPECTATIONS. PHYSICALLY NOTHING WENT RIGHT. ONE OF THE TENTS COLLAPSED. TRANSPORTATION WAS POOR AND A STEADY RAIN FELL DURING ALL THREE DAYS. FAR MORE DISCONCERTING WAS THE LIMITED NUMBER OF MILITANTS, FIVE OR SIX THOUSAND AT BEST (THE RPR DREW 50,000 AT ITS DECEMBER 5 RALLY IN PARIS). ON THE OTHER HAND, THE FIRST DAY, WITNESS TO BOTH SOISSON'S ELECTION AND THE FOUNDING OF THE NEW PARTY, HAD AN UNDENIABLE ANIMATION. ALL THE RI/PR MEMBERS OF GOVERNMENT WERE PRESENT, DEPARTING DISCREETLY AFTER THE MEETING AT SOISSON'S REQUESTS IN ORDER NOT TO GIVE STRENGTH TO THE ARGUMENT OF THOSE WHO BELIEVE THAT FORMER NOTABLES WOULD RUN THE NEW PARTY. EMBOFFS PRESENT HEARD COMPLAINTS OF A LACK OF ORGANIZATION (ESPECIALLY IN THE COMMISSIONS), OF THE ABSENCE OF A PROGRAM, OF THE FAILURE ON THE PART OF IR LEADERS TO HAVE SUPPORTED CANDIDATES FROM THE BASE IN THE MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. THE HIGH POINT OF THE CONGRESS WAS SOISSON'S SPEECH.

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4. "THE CODE OF GOOD CONDUCT". IN AN EFFORT TO SURMOUNT MAJORITY STRIFE, SOISSON CALLED FOR A MAJORITY PACT, A CODE OF GOOD CONDUCT THAT WOULD SEE ALL MAJORITY PARTIES RALLYING TO SUPPORT THE BEST MAN AFTER THE FIRST ROUND IN THE NEXT ELECTIONS AND POSSIBLY EVEN AGREEING ON SOME COMMON CANDIDATES BEFORE THE FIRST ROUND. THUS HE REPEATS BARRE AND CHIRAC, BOTH OF WHOM HAVE PUBLICLY ADVOCATED THE SAME THING. THIS PACT WILL CONSTITUTE THE MOST IMPORTANT OF SOISSON'S THREE MAJOR LINES OF ACTION, THE OTHER TWO BEING A PARTY PLATFORM BASED ON THE PRESIDENT'S BOOK "FRENCH DEMOCRACY", AND

AN ATTACK A LA RPR OF THE COMMON PROGRAM. GOING OUT OF HIS WAY MOST OF THE TIME NOT TO GET UP GAULLIST HACKLES, SOISSON NONETHELESS UNEQUIVOCALLY DECLARED BARRE THE LEADER OF THE MAJORITY, OPENING THE DOOR TO AN EVENTUAL PROBLEM WITH CHIRAC (WHO SEES HIMSELF AS SUCH). FINALLY, ECHOING ALAIN PEYREFITTE IN HIS RECENT BESTSELLER "THE FRENCH ILLNESS", SOISSON LEVELLED A STINGING ATTACK ON INSUPPORTABLE FORMALISM (READ: THE BUREAUCRACY) AND DECLARED THAT THE PR WOULD REFUSE "THE TUTELE OF THE STATE WHEN IT IS NOT JUSTIFIED BY GENERAL INTEREST." IT WAS A GOOD SPEECH THAT HAS RAISED SOISSON, AT LEAST FOR NOW, TO A NEW LEVEL ON THE POLITICAL SCENE.

5. THE POLITICAL BUREAU: IF SOISSON PLANNED TO RID THE PARTY OF ITS MOSS, HE ACHIEVED A LIMITED SUCCESS. PONIATOWSKI, "THE YOUNGEST MILITANT OF US ALL", WAS DECLARED HONORARY PRESIDENT AMID WILD APPLAUSE. (NOTE: PONIA, THE MAN WHO SAID, "YOU DON'T WOUND IN POLITICS; YOU KILL", HAD TEARS IN HIS EYES.) ALAIN GRIOTTERAY, PART OWNER OF THE RIGHT-WING DAILY "MINUTE", WAS NAMED ONE OF THE THREE GENERAL DELEGATES. NEVERTHELESS YOUNG CONFIDENTIAL

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BLOOD WAS IN EVIDENCE THROUGHOUT THE CONGRESS. BERNARD LEHIDEUX (32) AND JEAN-PIERRE RAFFARIN (28) WERE THE OTHER TWO GENERAL DELEGATES. DOMINIQUE BUSSEREAU (25), FORMER HEAD OF THE RI - ALLIED SOCIAL AND LIBERAL GENERATION, ALSO JOINED THE POLITICAL BUREAU. IN THIS RESPECT SOISSON IS ON THE MARK. AS MANY AS HALF OF THE 68 RI/PR DEPUTIES STAND TO LOSE THEIR SEATS IN THE NEXT ELECTION, BRINGING THE PARTY DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO THE MINIMUM OF 30 REQUIRED TO CONSTITUTE A GROUP IN THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY. SOISSON'S PLAN IS TO REPLACE THEM WITH NEW BLOOD BROUGHT IN AT FREJUS AND AFTERWARDS.

6. PROBLEMS: SOISSON WILL HAVE GREAT DIFFICULTY OVERCOMING THE MYRIAD OF PROBLEMS HIS PARTY CONFRONTS:

A) TROOPS: THERE SIMPLY AREN'T ENOUGH OF THEM. THE PARTY'S IMPLANTATION, THOUGH IT EXISTS ON

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-----261830Z 057943 /42

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A NATIONAL SCALE, IS THIN. LOCAL ORGANIZATION IS
LOOSE, BASED MORE ON PERSONAL RELATIONS THAN ON
STRUCTURE.

B) MONEY: SURPRISINGLY, THE RI/PR, PARTY
OF NOTABLES, NEEDS MONEY. MATIGNON WILL CERTAINLY
CONTINUE TO LEND A HAND ON THE SIDE; BUT BIG
BUSINESS IS FOR THE MOST PART GIVING ITS SPARE
SCRATCH TO CHIRAC. FURTHERMORE BY DISTANCING
HIS PARTY FROM THE NOTABLES, SOISSON RISKS SEEING
ANOTHER SOURCE DRY UP.

C) LEADER OF THE MAJORITY: IT'S ALL WELL AND
GOOD FOR SOISSON TO DECLARE THAT CHIRAC IS HIS
PAL AND THAT HE (SOISSON) WON'T TOLERATE ANY DISCORD
WITH THE GAULLISTS. BUT THE PARTY DOES
NOT BACK HIM COMPLETELY ON THIS; AND SOISSON HIMSELF,
AS STATED ABOVE, IS TREADING ON THIN ICE WHEN HE
CALLS BARRE THE "INSTITUTIONAL HEAD" OF THE MAJORITY.

D) TIME: AT FREJUS, SOISSON DIVIDED THE TIME
REMAINING BEFORE THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS INTO
THREE 100-DAY SLICES: FIRST SET UP THE FEDERATIONS;
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THEN PRESENT THE PARTY'S FORMAL PLAN; FINALLY BEGIN

THE ELECTORAL BATTLE. IT SOUNDED GREAT IN THE ARENA, BUT 300 DAYS IS VERY SHORT TO ORGANIZE A PARTY AND MOBILIZE AN ELECTORATE.

7. COMMENT: IT WILL BE SURPRISING IF SOISSON SUCCEEDS IN "SAVING" THE PARTY. EITHER HE ATTACHES HIMSELF TO CHIRAC'S SHIRTTAILS, AND IS DIMINISHED THEREBY, OR HE GOES IT ALONE, RUNNING THE RISK OF AFFRONTING THE GAULLISTS. EVEN IN AN UNEASY TRUCE WITH THE RPR, THE PR STANDS TO LOSE PROPORTIONATELY MORE IN 1978 THAN ITS BIG BROTHER. ON THE OTHER HAND THIS DOES NOT MEAN THE PR HAS NO CHANCE OF SURMOUNTING ITS DIFFICULTIES. RPR INTERESTS ARE SERVED IN MAINTAINING THE EXISTENCE OF THE PR ALONG WITH THE CENTER PARTIES, TO KEEP ELECTORS WHO CONSIDER CHIRAC TOO FAR RIGHT FROM VOTING FOR A UNITED LEFT CANDIDATE. THE MAJORITY PACT IDEA DOES SEEM TO BE CATCHING ON, THOUGH A DICHOTOMY EXISTS BETWEEN THAT AND RPR AVERSION TO BARRE'S LEADING THE MAJORITY. FINALLY THERE IS THE FACT OF SOISSON'S YOUTH AND DYNAMISM. IF FREJUS WAS A QUALIFIED SUCCESS, SOISSON'S ASCENSION TO THE TOP AND HIS DETERMINATION TO RUN THINGS WITH AN IRON HAND ARE JUST WHAT THE PARTY NEEDED. RESTING FOR TOO LONG ON THE LAURELS OF VGE'S MAY 1974 VICTORY, THE PARTY HAS FINALLY AWAKENED TO THE FACT THAT IT'S NOW OR NEVER.

8. SOISSON'S CONSCIOUS EFFORT TO DISTANCE THE NEW PARTY FROM GISCARD MUST BE VIEWED IN THE CONTEXT OF PURE ELECTORAL STRATEGY. SOISSON WAS IN THE CHIRAC GOVERNMENT AND BOTH OF BARRE'S. HE IS PERSONALLY CLOSE TO VGE; HE IS FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF THE ACTION AND PROPOSITION GROUP THAT SEEKS TO IMPLEMENT THE PHILOSOPHY OF "FRENCH DEMOCRACY";
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HE WAS A FORMER ASSISTANT SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE PARTY WHEN GISCARD WAS ITS CHIEF. WE CAN BE SURE THAT SOISSON'S DECISION TO DETATCH THE PR FROM THE ELYSEE HAS THE PRESIDENT'S BLESSING INsofar AS IT WILL PRESUMABLY HELP VITALIZE THE PARTY AND BRING IN VOTERS. BUT IT'S A BIG HILL TO CLIMB AND TIME IS SHORT.
GAMMON

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PARTY LINE, POLITICAL PARTIES, PARTY MEETINGS, MEETING REPORTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 26-May-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977PARIS15500
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770188-0906
Format: TEL
From: PARIS
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
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Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770514/aaaaalys.tel
Line Count: 327
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
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Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 6
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 PARIS 9350
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
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Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 2355677
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: REPUBLICAN PARTY SUCCEEDS INDEPENDENT REPUBLICANS
TAGS: PINT, FR
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odhc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/35673289-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009